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NOFORN*Tibetan operations*

COVERT ACTION IN HIGH ALTITUDES



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"In 1950 the Chinese came to Kham." This was the opening sentence of what became a familiar litany to American officers who worked with the Tibetans on one of the more total and romantic programs of covert action undertaken by the Agency. With this simple description, the pragmatic Tibetans would proceed to make their case for American support in a common fight. The Tibetans told a story of how the Chinese were systematically setting out to destroy their culture, particularly the religion around which their lives were organized. Like frontiersmen, they asked for help, not in terms of money or subsidies, but for arms and training so that they might fight their own fight.

The Tibetans' pleas fell on responsive ears within the U.S. Government. North Korea had invaded South Korea in June of that year and the U.S. Government was still smarting over the Chinese Communist takeover of the mainland the year before. When the Dalai Lama sent emissaries from Yatung, his temporary capital just across the Tibet-Sikkim border, they found willing negotiators within the American Embassy in India. The 15-year-old Dalai Lama had decided to come to Yatung after his plea to the United Nations in December 1950 had produced no helpful response. His advisors had been concerned that if he stayed in Lhasa he might be captured and the central figure of their civilization thereby be lost. The young ruler was faced with the decision of whether to return to Lhasa and attempt to alleviate the lot of his people by working with the Chinese, or to flee abroad where he and his ecclesiastical court might act as a rallying point for the resistance effort then being organized in eastern Tibet.

In the spring of 1951, Mr. Loy Henderson, the American Ambassador to India, began informal conversations with representatives of the Dalai Lama to explore the terms of his possible refuge outside Tibet. A variety of Hollywood-like schemes for flying or sneaking the Dalai Lama to safety outside Tibet were considered and discarded. The American Government was interested in having the Dalai Lama remove himself to a place such as Ceylon where he could rally his fellow Buddhists against the Chinese Communists. The terms of American support were outlined in a "letter"* which Ambassador Henderson sent to the Dalai Lama on 17 September 1951. The American Government pledged appropriate financial support to him, his family, and a retinue of approximately 100 persons, "so long as mutually satisfactory purposes are being served." The "letter" also said that the U.S. Government regarded resistance to Communist encroachment in Tibet as a long-term problem and was prepared to "support resistance now and in the future against Chinese aggression and to provide such material [support] as may be feasible."

The Dalai Lama pondered over these offers and the situation of his people in Tibet and eventually felt his duty lay in returning to Lhasa. In February 1952, his elder brother Takster Rimpoche, who is also considered an incarnate lama in this unique family, came to the United States to explain his brother's reasons for going back to his traditional capital. Assistant Secretary Allison assured Takster that the U.S. Government understood the reasons why the Dalai Lama felt he must return, and he reaffirmed the assurances of support made by his predecessor, Dean Rusk. American representatives candidly discussed with the Tibetans the bleak prospects they saw for further approaches to the United Nations. The Department advised

*This letter was not physically delivered to the Dalai Lama, but his representatives were permitted to make notes. These they transmitted verbatim to their leader, who kept them for future reference.

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that—in view of the disappointing opposition they had found from such diverse countries as the United Kingdom, the Chinese Nationalists, the USSR, and others—the Tibetans had little to gain by pushing their case at the United Nations at that time.

The Dalai Lama made his way back up the Chumbi Valley in July 1952, and the U.S. promises of covert aid were shelved while the god-king attempted to reach an accommodation with the Chinese. Under the agreement which Tibetan representatives had signed under duress in the Dalai Lama's absence in 1951, the Chinese extended their occupation throughout all of Tibet. Life under their rule became increasingly harsh. Various efforts which the Dalai Lama made both to mitigate this rule and to reform his own archaic government were frustrated by the Chinese. By 1956 the Dalai Lama had despaired of his ability to provide effective political rule to his country, and he considered withdrawal from all secular life. His two brothers, Takster Rimpoche and Gyalo Thondup had traveled to Europe and the United States making inconclusive contacts with various governments from whom they sought aid. This early trip provided useful experience for Gyalo, who later took on the role of a one-man foreign minister, espionage chief, and political advisor to the Dalai Lama. He also served as a spiritual buffer for his brother, who always found it difficult to reconcile his position as the prime exponent of Buddhist non-violence with his political role as leader of his people's efforts to resist with force the Chinese invaders who threatened both the Tibetan State and its religion. Gyalo was to fulfill these diverse demands with great skill and integrity beginning in 1956 and continuing through the present time. In 1956 he received a mixed reception in Washington. The American Government, when it thought about the situation of Tibet (which was not often), was divided on policy. There were those who felt that Dalai Lama should flee to a neighboring Buddhist country and thereby provide a symbol of anti-Communism to his fellow Buddhists. Others, mostly within the Agency, felt that he served a more important purpose by remaining in Tibet as a rallying point for his own people. There was also the issue of whether the U.S. Government should support independence or autonomy for Tibet. Our allies, the United Kingdom, the Chinese Nationalists (Chiang K'ai-shek and Mao Tse-tung could both agree on this issue), and India had taken strong positions against recognition of Tibetan independence.

At this low ebb in Tibetan fortunes, a unique opportunity presented itself for the Dalai Lama to re-establish contact with the outside world where he could seek help for his people's resistance movement. In December 1955, the Maharaj Kumar of Sikkim was permitted by the Chinese to go to Lhasa to issue an invitation for the Dalai Lama to attend the Buddha Jayanti, the 2,500th anniversary of the birth of Buddha which was to be celebrated in India in 1956. The Dalai Lama sent word back to the Americans by way of the Sikkimese ruler that he was anxious to flee Tibet and was considering seeking asylum in India if the Chinese permitted him to go there for the Buddhist ceremony.

Various policy issues concerning asylum, the future role of the Dalai Lama, and the future of Tibet were thrashed out at meetings between State and Agency officers that summer. Contrary to expectations, the Chinese permitted the Dalai Lama to go to India and he arrived in New Delhi in 1956. The U.S. Government again deferred to the Dalai Lama's own judgment as to whether he should return to Tibet. His request that President Eisenhower discuss the issue of Tibet and independence with Prime Minister Nehru, who was visiting Washington that December, was not taken up. The United States did agree to support the Dalai Lama should he decide that exile was the only answer. He, however, decided again to return to Tibet, and he and his party left from Sikkim in February 1957. The Agency, in the meantime, had made plans with his

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brother Gyalo* to train and dispatch six men as radio teams to work with the Tibet resistance. The United States wanted a unilateral capability for determining how much resistance activity existed in Tibet, in order that it might weigh further commitments.

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Political events in Lhasa caused the Agency's time schedule for building a resistance organization inside Tibet to be scratched. On 10 March 1959 thousands of Tibetans, apparently suspicious of Chinese intentions, surrounded the Dalai Lama's palace in Lhasa and prevented him from going to a theatrical performance that the Chinese authorities had invited him to attend at their military headquarters. During the coming week, the break between the Chinese and the Tibetans worsened steadily, and on the night of March 19th the Dalai Lama, dressed in the rough clothes of a Khamba farmer, left his palace to begin a long and secret flight to asylum in India.

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The political drama then being staged in central Tibet focused Chinese military activity on the area. [Redacted]

[Redacted] the Agency had to shift to longer-term plans. In May 1959, 20 more Tibetans were exfiltrated and brought to the new training site which had been established in Colorado. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] This training camp, known as "Dumra" (garden spot) by the Tibetans, was to operate for the next five years. During that time, approximately 260 Tibetans were trained in this valley south of Leadville, where the early Colorado mining pioneers had prospected and the U.S. Tenth Mountain Division had trained during World War II.

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Very soon after he arrived in India, the Dalai Lama indicated that he was unwilling to accept the limited role of a prominent religious leader in exile that the Indian Government wished him to accept. On 23 April he sent a message to the U.S. Government reaffirming his determination to support the resistance of his people and asking the United States to recognize his government and supply assistance to those continuing the resistance. He restated this request in formal fashion in a scroll, written in the traditional Tibetan script with full seals affixed, which he sent to President Eisenhower. In this message, he asked that the United States make Tibetan independence a prerequisite for Communist China's entry into the United Nations. At the same time the Dalai Lama had sent Nehru a message requesting his intercession to cause Peking to withdraw their forces from Tibet, free all imprisoned Tibetans, permit an international force to supervise the Chinese withdrawal, and authorize the International Red Cross to carry on medical and relief assistance. He proposed to make these four points public at a press conference in June, despite Nehru's disapproval and preference that he work quietly for Tibetan autonomy. The Dalai Lama, therefore, anxiously awaited the United States response to see whether he could expect U.S. support should his Indian host turn against him. He was extremely disappointed when the United States replied orally with less than the full assurances that he desired. The United States did reaffirm its willingness to back his case fully at the United Nations.

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These efforts culminated in the UN resolution of 21 October 1959 which deplored Chinese Communist violations of human rights in Tibet as increasing world tensions and embittering relations between peoples. While this resolution was certainly far less than the declaration of Tibetan independence which the Dalai Lama wanted, the UN action served to keep his case before the attention of the international community. Plans were made for him to visit the United States the coming spring to dramatize his case. Mr. Gross persuaded the National Council of Christians and Jews to call a conference at which the Dalai Lama would be the principal guest and speaker. It was to be held in the Peter Cooper Union in New York and was to be followed by a visit to Washington where the Dalai Lama would have been unofficially received by the President. The Dalai Lama, however, felt that it would be a bad precedent for him to accept an unofficial invitation, and he therefore rejected the invitation. While strong efforts were made to persuade him and his brother that it was a poor political judgment to lose the advantage of the publicity which such a visit would have produced, the Dalai Lama took the position that he could not prejudice his country's future claims to independence in return for any short-term advantage.

The complementary paramilitary action designed to broaden the resistance which would substantiate the Tibetans' political appeals also went into full gear that fall. A series of air drops, begun in September 1959, continued through the following spring.

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After 1 May 1960, when Francis Powers' U-2 was shot down over Russia, it became increasingly difficult to obtain approvals of overflight missions anywhere, particularly into an area so peripheral to U.S. strategic interests as Tibet. It was almost another year before the Agency made another overflight of Tibet [Redacted]

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[Redacted] 1,800 Tibetans who were encamped in the Mustang peninsula. These men, most of them Khambas from eastern Tibet, had made their way from the Darjeeling region in early 1960 when they heard that a new guerrilla army was forming in Nepal. We had talked to the Tibetans in terms of a few hundred men for cross-border raids into Tibet, but more than 2,000 potential guerrillas jammed into Indian trains or came by foot to enlist and to demand arms. While it was supposed to be a secret operation, word got around very quickly. [Redacted]

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In the summer of 1961, the Dalai Lama announced plans for a new constitution. The Agency had encouraged this move by the Dalai Lama, and Ambassador Gross had drafted a preliminary document. The Dalai Lama modified this document to fit his idiom and ideas which were surprisingly liberal, particularly concerning his willingness to give up state lands and subject himself to a form of recall. His scattered constituents debated and voted on this constitution in refugee camps throughout India and Nepal for the following two years. The only popularly expressed reservations were that the Dalai Lama had granted too generous a constitution. The international community had been informed of this constituent process by an article by Ambassador Gross which appeared in the October edition of *Foreign Affairs*. By the time the UN again considered Tibet at its autumn 1961 session, the Tibetans had additional evidence to back their claim to political self-determination. On 20 December the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution renewing its call for the cessation of practices which deprived the Tibetan people of their fundamental human rights and freedom, including their right to self-determination. This was to be the height of UN support for Tibetan aspirations.

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For the first nine months of 1962 there was little movement on either the political front at the UN or among the resistance forces sitting on the Nepal/Tibet border. In June Headquarters officers met with the guerrilla leader [redacted] and made plans for reconnaissance teams to begin operating north of the Tsangpo River inside Tibet, supported from guerrilla bases dispersed throughout the Mustang peninsula. In Delhi Ambassador Galbraith continued to voice objections to these guerrilla operations on the grounds that U.S. involvement would become public knowledge [redacted]

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[redacted] In Washington Acting Secretary Ball questioned the long-term utility of these operations, fearing that they represented merely a pin prick rather than any serious harrassment to the Chinese. Governor Harriman, then Assistant Secretary of State for the Far East, defended their utility as contributing to the claims of the Dalai Lama that he represented a viable alternative in Tibet. He saw these paramilitary operations as complementary to the political activity then being carried out within the Tibetan community as they debated and ratified the Dalai Lama's new constitution.

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[redacted] Since 1957, 133 Tibetans had been trained; [redacted]

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[redacted] There were still some questions about the value of becoming involved in such distant paramilitary adventures where U.S. control was by necessity remote and dependent upon the foreign policy of another country. John McCone, then Director of CIA, cited the problems that we had encountered in making full use of the guerrillas at Mustang. He asked his fellow members of the Speical Group why the United States created such assets if we couldn't ultimately control their use. He also questioned what would happen in the event of a Sino-Indian rapprochement. His colleagues agreed that the United States could probably do little to delay or temper such rapprochement. No one, however, was willing to abandon the Mustang forces or the greater U.S. involvement in the Sino-Indian confrontation.

By mid-November the Chinese were invading the northeast frontier in force, and there was no question but that the United States would fully support both the Tibetan resistance efforts that it had built [redacted]

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[Redacted] the Agency also agreed to train at least an additional 125 agents at the Colorado training site. Gyalo immediately set off to recruit these men, and by early 1963 the Colorado training camp was in full gear. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] the Special Group again touched on the subject of the ultimate usefulness of this effort to the United States. They decided that nothing should be started with this group unless we, the U.S. Government, intended to carry it out. [Redacted]

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[Redacted] Accordingly, training proceeded under the concept of building self-sufficient teams of three men each who were to be sent back into areas across Tibet from Lhasa to the Golmo region on the West China border. The agents were to resettle in these areas—assuming that they found support among the population—and build local underground resistance units [Redacted]

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By June 1963 the 135 men who were at the Colorado training site had finished their instruction and were ready for dispatch.

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The trainees began returning to India in groups of 40 in late November 1963.

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On the political front, Gyalo took advantage of the new, more permissive Indian attitude. At our urging he requested Indian permission to open a Tibet House which would house a museum of Tibetan artifacts and a library. Gyalo utilized covert funds provided by us to assemble an outstanding collection of Tibetan *thankas*, including representative examples of these Tibetan religious wall hangings from each of the historic five schools. He had to act quickly as the desperate refugees were selling whatever they had been able to take out of Tibet, and these treasures were being dispersed. He also assembled the world's largest collection of works in English and Tibetan on Tibetan history and culture. Tibet House was finally opened in the spring of 1964 when Indira Gandhi cut the ribbon on what has since become a major tourist attraction in New Delhi. Our purpose of continuing to focus publicity on the Tibetans as a unique and separate culture has been well served by Tibet House. Gyalo also obtained Indian permission for the Tibetans to hold a convention in Benares in January 1964 at which the new constitution was proclaimed. He, meanwhile, had found himself severely hampered by the lack of young Tibetans who spoke English and who were in any way familiar with governmental affairs in India, let alone the United Nations. We accordingly worked out with him a "young Turk" program to bring selected young Tibetans to the United States for nine months of education in English, comparative government, and anthropology. The 20 graduates of this specialized training all returned to India, where the Dalai Lama has used them as administrators or sent them abroad again as foreign representatives.

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The Dalai Lama had continued to press ahead with his political plans. In April 1964 the tireless Gyalo Thondup had organized the Tibetan Chokhasum Party (defense of religion by the three regions). This party, espousing the liberal principles embodied in the constitution, was designed to encourage the efforts which the team members were making to organize an underground inside Tibet. The party published a newspaper which was circulated in the Tibetan refugee camps throughout India and was smuggled by the underground teams into Tibet.

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Finally in December of 1965

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the UN General Assembly passed its third and last resolution concerning Tibet.

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Although the new 303 Committee, at its 30 September 1969 meeting, endorsed a proposal to continue assistance [redacted] including provision for a trimmed down Mustang force, it became apparent that the Tibetan guerrillas at Mustang were a wasting force politically. In 1972 funds were approved for resettling the several hundred guerrillas who still remained at Mustang. Although these troops resisted dispersal, they eventually yielded and resettled either in India or in small groups scattered throughout the Nepalese peninsula. The Nepalese Government collected their arms and thus ended the saga of one of the world's highest guerrilla forces.

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The Offices of Tibet in New Delhi and New York have continued, although the Department has recently asked that word be passed to the Tibetans that they would

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like to see the New York office closed. The Agency's subsidy to maintain the New York office stopped in 1973. That was the same year in which the Agency stopped funding the intelligence activities directed into Tibet. The Dalai Lama's headquarters at Dharmasala has remained active—staffed by the 20 Agency-trained "young Turks." In June 1976 the Operations Advisory Group approved a final lump sum payment of the annual subsidy to the Dalai Lama, ending a commitment made 25 years earlier.

The Tibetans now are completely on their own. In many ways they always were. The United States, despite the best of will and intent, was hampered by the geopolitics of the situation [redacted] The sparse population and barren plains of Tibet provided no fish for guerrillas to swim with. The best the Dalai Lama and his still devoted exile constituents now can hope for is to remain demonstrably cohesive so that the Chinese may find a sufficiently useful symbol of legitimacy to permit their return. Time, however, is on the Chinese side, and the U.S. détente with Peking means that the Tibetans must make any bargains on their own rather than as part of some larger package. Neville Maxwell of the *London Times*, who is the first Western journalist to visit Tibet in many years, currently reports that the Dalai Lama's "ancient castle is at once magnificent and dead." The Potala now is a museum visited daily by the young citizens of Lhasa who have not known in their lifetimes the god-king or the historic religion and culture he headed.

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Weighed against the Tibetans' present bleak prospects, the 25 years of covert action involving their cause seem not to have been worth the investment of lives, money, efforts, and national prestige which it cost the Tibetans, [redacted] and our government. Weighed against the whole period and the future, the balance sheet looks more reasonable.

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For the Tibetans, the U.S. promises of covert support permitted the Dalai Lama to test fully whatever remote possibility there may have been in the 1950s for productive accommodation with the Chinese. Our support gave the Tibetan resistance a chance in 1958 and 1959 to challenge the Chinese [redacted]

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[redacted] Our assistance assured the Dalai Lama and his followers the capability to attract international attention to their plight and to their claim to represent an independent Tibet. Our supply undoubtedly stiffened the will of the Indian government to be hospitable to the Tibetans. Without Indian hospitality and tolerance of their political activities, the Tibetans would have soon been scattered and absorbed without a trace in the mass scene of the sub-continent. Today they are still a cohesive political unit with separate identity in India and Nepal. They have a claim, albeit slender, in the future.

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[redacted] Our initial primary objective of causing an economic drain on the struggling Chinese economy and thereby placing a limit on Peking's military capabilities was unfulfilled. Our

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purposes in the 1950's and 1960's of demonstrating Peking's unacceptability for membership in the international community were well served by our successful efforts to publicize the Tibetan cause.

Finally, our involvement was right for the times and the ideal we professed. The Tibetans never approached us as supplicants, but as fellow believers in similar democratic values who were temporary victims of a common enemy. They asked for the means to fight for their own cause, which they assumed was ours. Our willingness to respond to this appeal was noted by those other nations who were then judging our readiness to commit ourselves against our professions. It was an honorable operation.

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